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SUBJECT: ATTEMPT TO FORM NEXT BELGIAN GOVERNMENT IN DANGER  
OF FOUNDERING

Classified By: Political Counselor Theodore H Andrews, Reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Flemish Christian Democrat Yves Leterme's 148 day attempt to form a new Belgian government could collapse entirely during the week of November 5. If he is unable to forge an agreement on the contentious Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde redistricting issue by November 7, at least two of his potential coalition partners have threatened to suspend participation in the government formation process. Such an eventuality could prompt Leterme to start all over again with different coalition partners, or even lead King Albert II to ask someone else to cobble a government together. More likely, however, is a tortured "Belgian compromise" that enables the parties to stay at the negotiating table. End summary

¶2. (U) Belgium's media has devoted considerable attention to the milestone reached on November 5, the 148th day of failed attempts to forge a new government following the June 10 federal elections. To most major news outlets, the day was a monument to the grasping nature and narrow-mindedness of the country's political leadership. Even if fears for the country's future were overblown, local observers have lamented the impact of the continuing crisis on Belgium's international image.

¶3. (U) Blame for the current impasse has fallen mostly on three men and one woman, government "formateur" Leterme, his Flemish nationalist ally Bart De Wever of the N-VA (New Flemish Alliance), francophone chauvinist Olivier Maingain of the FDF (Front for the Defense of the Francophones), and francophone Christian Democratic leader Joelle Milquet. While observers of (and participants in) the formation process have faulted De Wever, Maingain, and Milquet for stubbornly defending the interests of their own language community and undermining the national interest, Leterme has been the target of complaints about a lack of readiness to lead at the highest levels of government.

¶4. (C) Much of the criticism appears to be well founded. In his defense, Leterme can note that he has managed to broker compromises on several contentious areas, including foreign and defense policy, and many areas of social and economic policy. That said, his failure to divine a path through the morass of conflicting views on "institutional" issues has put serious dents in his reputation as a steady as she goes leader ready for service at the national level. Just as worrisome for many Belgians has been his failure so far to muzzle some of the more nationalistic firebrands in his own party or in the ranks of De Wever's group, a small party that provided a critical margin of support to Leterme's Christian Democrats during the election.

¶5. (SBU) Our contacts believe there are three likely

scenarios now. The most likely eventuality is yet another tortured Belgian compromise that permits the parties to back away from threats to abandon the negotiating table. Leterme has promised to provide a "concrete" text on November 6 for the negotiating partners that we suspect will achieve this aim. The second possibility is the total collapse of the current formation talks. What will happen if this takes place is difficult to say, but it might involve Leterme's withdrawal from the process. King Albert II could ask someone else, probably a francophone, to put the government together, and then name Leterme as Prime Minister.

16. (C) The third possibility involves a sudden burst of creativity on Leterme's part. He could yet come forward with just the right package of proposals to solve Belgium's crisis. This is the least likely eventuality. Fox

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